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A Remembered Glory

The earth at this season clings feebly to the threads of its remembered glory. And we, like the land itself, struggle now to recover, in this time of chill morning fogs and late evening hearthfires, something of the hopeful mood which a holiday so thoroughly American as Thanksgiving inevitably engenders in us.

Thanksgiving, the last lull before a busy shopping season that is itself a symptom of our misplaced ideals, is a time — if ever there was one — when Americans like to feel good about themselves. And perhaps in this Thanksgiving of 1980 we will find ourselves thinking as never before about how intimately our lives are bound up with the broad currents of our national destiny.

Are our prospects as a nation as dismal as they have suddenly come to seem? Or is it possible that to some extent we have fallen victim to our own headlines?

It is unquestionably true that the same headlines which warn of our doom tell of far more profound changes in other lands. Yet there is no denying that a certain villainy has taken root among us; we see it in the economic statistics, in our political disorders, in the spirit of alienation that even now stalks the national consciousness.

Where, then, have we gone wrong? Why in a land abounding with natural resources and the world's most sophisticated technology are the economic disparities between the underclasses and the well-to-do greater than ever before? Is our industrial order itself to blame? Has our "cult of bigness" played us false? Why are we suddenly so fearful? And why do we seem to have been plunged back into 1935 again?

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Fifty years ago, when the poet John Crowe Ransom and his little band of Vanderbilt "fugitives" were speaking out against the headlong industrialization of the South, they seemed only to be indulging a literary conceit. We weren't really to take all of that seriously, were we? Their views of agrarianism, so eloquently expressed in "I'll Take My Stand," seemed wholly archaic, a trifle foolish and, as one critic said, smelled "too much of the lamp."

What was a land so innured to the uplifting rhetoric of Henry Grady and other "New South" boomers to make of Ransom's comment that we should accept industrialism — if at all — "with a very bad grace?" What was a land hungry for jobs and racial justice to make of his rather aristocratic notion that in the midst of growth and change the South should strive above all "to maintain a good deal of her traditional philosophy?"

In the years since then we have continued to bow down before the brokers of bigness, enterprise, growth and change. It is an old story, how newspaper editors and political leaders and chambers of commerce all across the South have conspired to rear up a frenetic Yankeedom in our midst. And indeed we have had much to boast about in these years.

Yes, let there be no doubt about it: Whenever the cutters of ribbons have gone out to welcome a new factory into town we have all been there in spirit. We have all joined in the applause. We have felt a new surge of pride and have nodded approvingly when told that the benefits of industry far outweigh the disadvantages of "just a little more pollution."

So has it ever been in America. The Industrial Revolution that caught England by surprise more than 200 years ago found a more congenial home on Colonial soil, where there was no deeply imbedded aristocratic tradition, no landed gentry (except in the South, of course) to stand in the way.

But why, one again asks, has industrialism spread its rewards so unevenly? Why have so many thousands of men and women fled from an unprofitable life on the land only to find an even more barren prospect at the end of their journey? What of the squalid ghettoes and the cry of the cities? What of all the clamor and congestion and dirty air? What of terror, drug addiction the feeling of futility and a thousand other afflictions that "progress" has brought into our lives?

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On this uncertain Thanksgiving of 1980 we find ourselves caught up in a wave of nostalgia suddenly made popular by Ronald Reagan and his new Republican majority. But is it only nostalgia? Is there nothing of value left in that old idea of neighborhood and sense of community? It is, to be sure, a concept straight out of Norman Rockwell's America, hooted at by the fashion setters, the trendmakers, the cross-busers and the seekers of undeviating norms in everything from food to clothing to the way of a man's speech.

But what have the Now Generation and the Me Decade given us in their turn? Alas, having tested and retested the waters of these "liberating ideologies," we now find ourselves somewhat in the condition of T.S. Eliot's hollow men, our headpieces stuffed with straw, "our dried voices" as "quiet and meaningless as wind in dry grass or rats' feet over broken glass" in a dry cellar. Perhaps, then, we have strayed too far afield.

It was no less a critic of our social order than Lewis Mumford, the author of such books as "The City in History" and "The Pentagon of Power," who reminded us not long ago that we would somehow have to recover both the substance and spirit of the small town if we were to survive as a civilization.

A gloomy thought it was — to suppose that neither urban sophistication, the welfare state, the world of agribusiness nor General Motors could bring redemption into our lives. Yet such was Mumford's theme — and an old theme at that. What makes it pertinent now is that so many other people — ordinary people — have begun to share his views. The impact of that feeling was clearly evident in the recent presidential election — a feeling more felt than understood.

The cult of bigness and the horrors it has brought in its wake have now worked their way into our politics, into our national subconscious. And the answer, in Mumford's view, was not in some kind of process of adaptibility — which in this case would only speed our ruin — but rather in a wholesale reordering of our national living patterns.

He might have lifted all of this out of Ransom or even out of Thomas Jefferson, whose vision of an agrarian America — every man content under his own fig tree — was already beginning to seem a bit unworkable in his own day.

Unworkable? Yes, but even so, the vision, if not the reality, has persisted, however dimly, throughout all our years of striving for national greatness — through the era of the great capitalists, the booming cities, on into the age of the atom, the chess-playing computer and the neutron bomb.

And it persists even now, as much as it did in that long ago era before the dawn of "Manifest Destiny" and "Fifty-Four-Forty or Fight," a vision that has survived both the clamor for "progress" and the savage attacks of such authors as Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson and Edgar Lee Masters.

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And so, as the long Thanksgiving holiday drops off into twilight we think of it all again, all the old verities, wondering how we are to regain that lost sense of neighborhood, of belonging, without leveling our cities and transforming today's cramped, uneasy, smog-breathing urban multitudes into a new breed of homesteaders, wondering most of all perhaps how we are to find the means that will enable us to triumph over our own diversity. And, in the end perhaps, to recapture all the remembered glory.